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Learning A–Z	level Z2		

Refer to the Focus Question on page 2 of this title to guide discussion and support additional learning connected to the text.

Built by the Maya people more than fifteen hundred years ago, **Chichén Itzá** is one of the most visited ruins in Mexico. Readers will learn how and why the city was built and learn about the fascinating culture of the Maya people.

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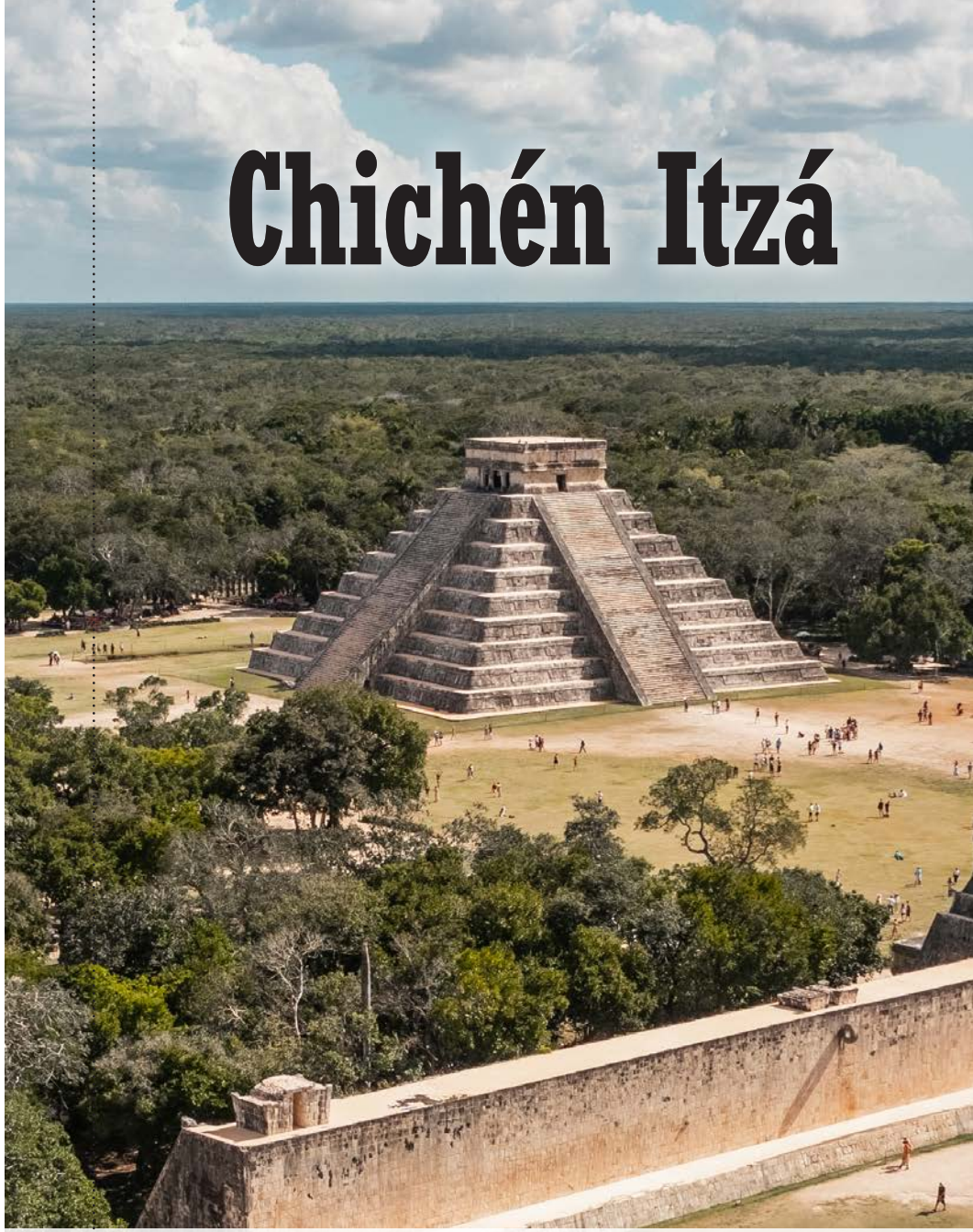
Chichén Itzá



Written by Lauren Mahon

Glossary

abandoned *(adj.)* page 4
left behind and uncared for

archaeologists *(n.)* page 4
scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures

artifacts *(n.)* page 6
any objects made or used by humans long ago

astronomy *(n.)* page 6
a field of science involving the study of the stars, planets, comets, and other things found in space

excavation *(n.)* page 19
the process of uncovering or digging out something

intricate *(adj.)* page 5
very detailed or complicated; complex

Maya *(n.)* page 4
a people and civilization of ancient Central America and southern Mexico who built stone pyramids

offerings *(n.)* page 8
things offered as contributions or gifts; gifts given by worshippers to a god or gods

restored *(v.)* page 5
returned to its original condition

ruins *(n.)* page 4
the remains of an old or destroyed building or other structure

sacrifice *(v.)* page 8
the act of offering something valuable to a god, often by killing a person or other animal in a ceremony

temples *(n.)* page 5
buildings that are places of worship

Chichén Itzá

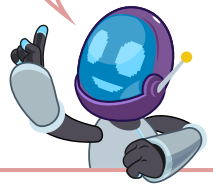
Above: The Maya people carved intricate designs on many of the buildings at Chichén Itzá.

Cover: Crowds of people come to see the stepped pyramid each year during the spring and fall equinoxes.

Written by Lauren Mahon

Focus Question

What has studying Chichén Itzá revealed about the ancient Maya culture?



Words to Know

abandoned
archaeologists
artifacts
astronomy
excavation
intricate
Maya
offerings
restored
ruins
sacrifice
temples

Connections

Writing

Imagine you took a trip to Chichén Itzá. Write a letter to a friend back home describing your experience. Be sure to include details from the book so your friend can imagine what it would be like to be there with you.

Social Studies

Choose another Maya city, such as Palenque or Tikal, and research it. Create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting this city with Chichén Itzá.

At one time, an estimated fifty thousand people lived in or near Chichén Itzá. Scientists continue to learn from the treasures they left behind.

The Search Continues

While **excavation** at Chichén Itzá has revealed much, there is still a great deal to be learned. Only five years ago, archaeologists discovered jade beads, knives, animal bones, and ancient human remains in the Holtun cenote, not far from the stepped pyramid. They also found evidence that the Maya built the pyramid so that it perfectly aligns with the Sun's path over the cenote. If Chichén Itzá's landscape and the descendants of the Maya who built it have more to tell, people are still listening.

So many people have visited the stepped pyramid that the steps have eroded and become too dangerous to climb.

A Visit to Chichén Itzá

Chichén Itzá is one of the most popular sites in Mexico, and more than one million people tour the site each year. In fact, promoting tourism was a big reason the Mexican government worked to restore the site. Tourism brings money to the government and also to the local Maya communities that still surround the city. While visitors may enter many buildings, access to some structures has been restricted for the safety of the ruins as well as the visitors. Since 2006, when a tourist died in a fall down one of the steep stairways of the stepped pyramid, climbing it has been forbidden.

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Location and Origin

A dozen or more of these statues were found at Chichén Itzá. They were used to hold offerings for the gods.

In Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula jungle lie the **ruins** of Chichén Itzá, a city of massive stone structures and a network of paved roads. The city was built by the **Maya**, a group of people native to the area in what is now Mexico. The name *Chichén Itzá* means "at the mouth of the well of Itzá" in the Mayan language. The Itzá are a Maya ethnic group who lived in the northern part of the Yucatan Peninsula. The well in the name's meaning refers to the water sources in the city, practical and sacred sites for the Maya people.

Some historians date the city's founding to the early 400s CE. Whenever it was constructed, by the 600s CE, the city was an important center for many different Maya ethnic groups. The Maya lived in Chichén Itzá for nearly one thousand years—from around 450 CE to 1450 CE. Then populations shifted away from the city, and it became mostly, but never entirely, **abandoned**. Since the nineteenth century, **archaeologists** have been studying the area of more than 7.5 square miles (19.4 sq km), with only 2 square miles (5.2 sq km) completely mapped.

The Maya Today

More than six million Maya people live in Central America, including Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Southern Mexico. They speak more than thirty languages, but their words for *house*, *sun*, *time*, *mother*, and *corn* sound almost identical across Mayan languages. These similarities show that some concepts are equally valued across all Maya cultures. Some of these concepts include the importance of family and community, and the relationship to corn. The Maya people continue to maintain an important connection to the sky, helping them know when to plant crops. The Maya are active participants in the international world, often integrating modern practices with ancient traditions. Maya people preserve their culture through their languages, traditions, and connections to the land and the sky.

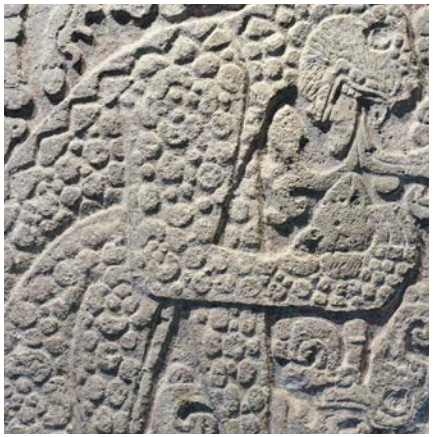
A Maya woman and children walk through a traditional marketplace in Guatemala.

El Caracol was built high on a platform to rise above vegetation that could block views of the heavens.

El Caracol (EL kah-rah-KOHL), Spanish for "the snail," is a carefully designed round tower that is the observatory in Chichén Itzá. It provides more clues that the ancient Maya people understood the movements of the planets and stars. The building faces a different direction from any other structure in the city. Instead, it is perfectly angled for viewing Venus when it appears at its northernmost point in the sky. The small windows that remain in the ruins of El Caracol are aligned with the northernmost and southernmost positions of Venus.

The Maya carefully planned the construction of their stepped pyramid so they could track the movement of the Sun.

The large stepped pyramid is in the center of Chichén Itzá.



A Maya artist created this temple carving of a jaguar, Ruler of the Underworld in Maya culture, eating a human heart.

Structures in Stone

Today, many of the impressive buildings in Chichén Itzá have been **restored** to look as they would have when they were first constructed. Maya people, using stone tools, made **intricate** carvings on stone buildings throughout the city. From these carvings, scientists learn about the early days of the Maya culture.

The most famous monument is a giant stepped pyramid, on top of which is the Temple of Kukulcán (koo-kool-KAHN), a god depicted as a winged **serpent**. In Maya culture, Kukulcán is the creator god, and the god of rain, wind, storms, and life. In this temple, and in many other **temples** in Chichén Itzá, priests led ceremonies in which gifts were offered to Maya gods.

It is likely that one of the goals of this ancient game was to hit a ball through this ring and others like it on the field.

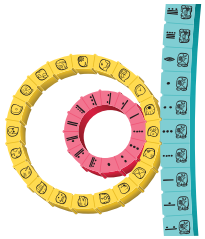
Another of Chichén Itzá's well-known features is the Great Ball Court, which was once home to a game called Pitz in the Mayan language. By looking at art and **artifacts**, scholars know that the game involved two teams of players who used their elbows, hips, and knees to hit a rubber ball. The ball was made from latex people harvested from the surrounding forests' rubber trees. Scholars are still piecing together the rules of the game. What is known for sure is that the game was often played for fun. It also re-enacted the creation story of the Maya people, and the triumph of good over evil.

Observatories are another feature of Chichén Itzá. The people of the city were dedicated to **astronomy**. They carefully designed several of their buildings to align with significant astronomical events, like solstices, eclipses, and lunar shifts.

Maya Calendars

Haab: 365-day solar calendar divided into eighteen 20-day months and one 5-day month

Tzolk'in: 260 days, which may represent nine cycles of the Moon



The Calendar Round: A 52-year cycle; when each day of the Haab is matched with a day of the Tzolk'in, it takes 52 years for the same pairing to occur again.

Scientific Secrets

The Maya calendar systems clearly show that they had an understanding of astronomy. They invented the concept of zero, and they developed complex calendars called *Haab* (HAHB), *Tzolk'in* (ZOHL-kin), and the *Calendar Round* based on the movements of planets. Some Maya communities still use these calendars today.

The stepped pyramid also reveals the Maya people's understanding of astronomy. It has four staircases with ninety-one steps each. Including the platform at the top, there is a step for every day of the year. Each staircase may represent one of the four seasons. It is possible that the people of Chichén Itzá built the pyramid in a way that allowed them to use it as a calendar, helping them know when to plant and harvest crops.

Roads from the Past

Maya architects didn't restrict themselves to planning and constructing buildings. The elevated roads, or *sacbeob* (sahk-bay-OHB), built by the Maya are also impressive. Each *sacbe* (SAHK-bay) had a layer of boulders as a base, covered with increasingly fine layers of stone, gravel, and powdered limestone. At Chichén Itzá, a network of seventy to eighty sacbeob connected the buildings and cenotes. Architects constructed longer roads to connect the city to nearby communities.

Centuries later, the sacbe leading to the Sacred Cenote still exists.

Buildings Near the Water

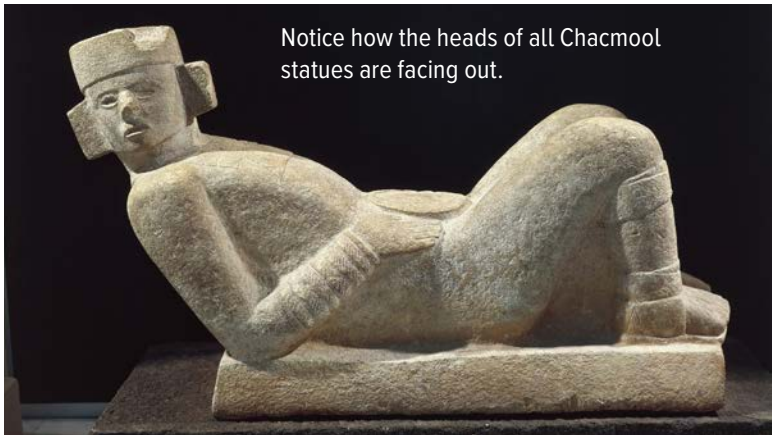
Scholars have wondered why the Maya chose this spot to build a city. Many think they may have chosen the site based on the presence of two cenotes (say-NOH-tayz). Cenotes are spots where water wells up from beneath Earth's surface. People used one cenote as a source of fresh water. The other, called the Sacred Cenote, had religious significance. The Maya believed that the Sacred Cenote was a pathway to the home of the rain god Chac. They believed that placing **offerings** in the water could win his favor and help Chac send enough rain for their crops. Archaeologists have found a number of interesting artifacts in cenotes, including tools, pottery, gold, and incense. Human bones found in the Sacred Cenote indicate that the ancient Maya sometimes carried out human **sacrifice** as part of their religion.

Archeologists have found artifacts on the rock ledges around cenotes that were likely placed there centuries ago.

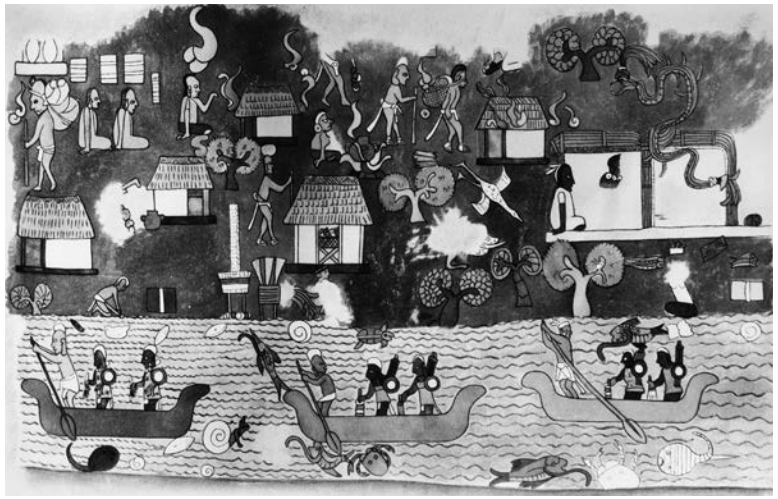
Each column surrounding the Temple of Warriors has carvings of Toltec warriors. The columns were originally painted. Some paint still remains.

While the people of Chichén Itzá did not maintain all the structures built in earlier styles, they didn't necessarily demolish them, either. The Maya often chose to build a larger structure over the existing one, keeping the older building inside. Scholars think this was a way to hold onto an old temple or palace's holiness or power, or to bring attention to history and time passing. Or it may have simply been a way to reduce the labor needed to construct an entirely new structure. In Chichén Itzá, workers built the stepped pyramid and the Temple of the Warriors on top of earlier structures.

During the tenth century, Chichén Itzá was conquered by a group of outsiders who brought new architectural styles with them. Archaeologists aren't sure whether the conquerors were the Toltec—a group of non-Maya natives from Central Mexico—or an ethnic group of Maya called the Itzá, for whom the city is named. In either case, structures that were built after this time often include both Maya and Toltec features. Many buildings, including both the stepped pyramid and the Great Ball Court, are carved with images of winged snakes and jaguars. These carvings are also seen on Toltec structures 930 miles (1497 km) to the west. The statues known as Chacmools (chahk-MOOLZ)—reclining human figures that hold offering dishes on their stomachs—may also be signs of Toltec influence. The Chacmools were used to hold offerings for the gods, such as tamales, tobacco, or flowers.



Notice how the heads of all Chacmool statues are facing out.



A copy of a wall painting from the Temple of the Warriors shows life at a Maya waterside village with warriors in canoes.

A Northern Outpost

Chichén Itzá was just one of many large cities built by the Maya. Over the course of four thousand years, the Maya empire extended across land that is now five different countries—Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Different Maya tribes and ethnic groups across this region spoke related languages and prayed to similar gods. They also shared a system of writing and calendars.

In what archaeologists call the Preclassic (1000 BCE-250 CE) and Classic (250-900 CE) periods of Maya civilization, many cities, such as Palenque (pah-LEN-keh) and Tikal (tee-KAHL) appeared in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala.

By around the year 1000, for reasons scholars still debate, the center of the Maya world moved north to the Yucatán (yoo-kah-TAHN) Peninsula. Some experts think that war, drought, or overcrowded cities may have caused the ruin of southern Maya cities. Populations there dropped, while in the north, Chichén Itzá grew and became the most powerful city in the region.

Aside from the large city of Mérida, coastal resorts, and a few other urban areas, much of the Yucatán Peninsula today is still jungles, forests, and farmland. Some Maya farmers continue to use successful farming methods passed down from their ancestors. The *milpa* system involves planting staple crops such as corn, beans, and squash in the same plot of land. They harvest each plant as it ripens. To replenish the soil, dead vegetation is burned, or the land is left unplanted for years.

Dating back to the eleventh century, this statue shows a Chac priest. Chac is the Maya rain god, who gives or withholds rain.

This building, known as Casa de las Monjas (the Nunnery), is in the Puuc style.

From One Phase to Another

Over the centuries, different groups of Maya invaded and conquered Chichén Itzá. Ruling families came from elsewhere in the Yucatán as well as from the lowlands to the south and from the Gulf of Mexico. Another group, from Central Mexico, may or may not have been Maya at all. The resulting mix of cultures produced a variety of architectural styles.

Many of the earlier buildings—constructed between the sixth and tenth centuries—are in the Puuc (POOK) style. The Puuc region, where the Maya city of Uxmal (oos-MAHL) was located, was west of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula. The Puuc style features strong horizontal lines in its design. Frequently, the lower halves of Puuc buildings are plain, while the upper halves are elaborately carved.